

# Narrative-realism, Preterism, and the relevance of scripture

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I recently came across - I guess my ears were burning - a [brief discussion initiated by Stephen Murray](#) about the difference between a 'narrative-historical' or 'narrative-realist' approach to biblical interpretation and classic Preterism. The question is pertinent, so I will attempt here to outline what I understand by a narrative-realist hermeneutic and how it compares with Preterism, with some final thoughts on how a historical reading can still provide the basis for a dynamic and transformative dependence on the living Word of God.

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## Historical-criticism

The historical-critical method raises different types of question about an ancient text. There is the question, first, of how the text came into existence, which becomes a *critical* question if investigation suggests that the provenance of the text is not what tradition has taken it to be. Historians might point to internal contradictions, inconsistencies, irregularities, or anachronisms in a text and draw the conclusion, for example, that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses but was compiled from a number of literary sources over centuries, achieving its final form (and perhaps significance) in the post-exilic period.

Secondly, there is the question of whether the circumstances and events described in the text actually took place as stated. Is the account historically accurate? Did these things really happen? So the historical-critical method might raise doubts about the 'truthfulness' of such extraordinary biblical stories as the exodus from Egypt or Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. The *critical* assumption again is that things might not be what they have *traditionally* seemed to be - and that we have the tools available to make a rational judgment on the matter.

Thirdly, there are questions under the 'history-of-religions' rubric relating to the origins and supposed uniqueness of the phenomenon that is described in the New Testament. The assumption is that the emerging Christian movement can be explained in much the

same way that we would explain other ancient religious movements, without recourse to presumptions of divine initiative.

A final, and in many respects more complex, type of question has to do with the *perspective or point of view* from which the texts are interpreted. The issue here is not so much whether what is said or implied in the text corresponds to objective reality, whether it is really what it purports to be. It is more a question of *how the story is read*, particularly in view of the distance in time, space and culture between the original historical context and the modern reader.

Over the centuries the church has devised numerous interpretive strategies with a view to maintaining the relevance of this ancient text for the purposes of contemporary spiritual formation. The most basic approach has been to assume that the text as inspired and unquestioned Word of God simply transcends history and speaks directly to the modern reader. So, for example, we might open the Bible at random and read: 'I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground' ([Is. 44:3](#)). We are probably not so naïve as to take this promise of God literally, but we may well read it as a direct assurance that he will bring revival to our country - and it may hardly cross our minds that this promise was originally made not to us but to Israel in exile.

## Medieval hermeneutics

Medieval theology developed an elaborate four-fold system of exegesis. At a *literal* level the story of Jonah is simply an account of what happened when Jonah was called by God to preach to the people of Nineveh. At a *tropological* level it can be read as a moral tale - perhaps along the lines of 'disobeying God will get you into deep waters'. Then we might take the further step of *allegorizing* the story: Jonah in the whale is Jesus descended into hell between his death and resurrection. Finally, at an *anagogical* level - really just a heightened form of allegory - all scripture speaks of God's universal plan for salvation: the story of Jonah is taken to illustrate the divine love that impelled Christ to set out on a journey of redemption.<sup>1</sup>

Although we have largely abandoned the technical terminology, it is not too difficult to find evidence of the survival of these approaches into the modern era. Much everyday biblical exposition - the do-it-yourself exegesis that we get in sermons, bible studies and popular Christian literature - is essentially either moralizing or allegorizing in character. Or we find that the dense, troublesome text of scripture is everywhere assimilated into the reductive evangelical 'myth' of the personal saviour who enters into the world to deliver people from their sins and eventually bring them to heaven. In the postmodern world we have the further, unsettling, option of generating new meaning from texts whose author, divine or otherwise, has been theoretically pronounced dead.

In all these instances the story is told from the perspective of a much later reader who, consciously or unconsciously, views the distant text through the telescope of a tradition, and the tradition inevitably *distorts* because it must subordinate the text to the interests of an unintended and situationally remote readership.

What a historical-critical approach would propose is that we endeavour as far as possible to read from a point of view *within* the narrative, by imaginatively taking upon ourselves the outlook, concerns, presuppositions, and limitations of the original readership.

This leads to what I have called a 'narrative-realist mode' of reading scripture: we read the Bible *as though* it were a road traversing the landscape of history; we imagine ourselves walking along that road; we notice the close connection between text and circumstance; and we ask how those who told or heard the story experienced the journey. This is a very different exercise to the more common approach which is to treat the text as a body of undifferentiated sacred material to be mined for pietistic or dogmatic purposes.

As we walk this road, however, we may discover that much of what we took to be universal teaching has a restricted historical reference or application. When we begin to suspect that this is equally true for what is said in the New Testament about the future, we find that we come under a barrage of accusations that this is nothing other than classic Preterism. So what is Preterism?

## Preterism

Preterism as a modern tradition of eschatological interpretation appears to have emerged in the seventeenth century as a reaction against the sort of Historicism that saw the Roman church as the fulfilment of prophecies concerning the antichrist. Hugo Grotius, for example, argued that this was a polemically motivated, anachronistic misreading of texts that had their proper frame of reference in the historical context of the first century.

Since the argument served as a defence of the Roman church against Protestant opprobrium and has sometimes been advanced by Catholic writers, Preterism is often labelled as a Jesuit-Romanist doctrine.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the first Preterist is generally reckoned to have been the Spanish Jesuit Luis De Alcazar (1554-1613). In his commentary on Revelation (*Investigation of the Hidden Sense of the Apocalypse*), he argued that the bulk of the prophecies contained in it were fulfilled in the era of pagan Rome. The first eleven chapters relate to the judgment on Jerusalem; and chapters 12-20 portend the defeat of Roman paganism. Thus far I am in agreement with him.<sup>3</sup> We disagree, however, over the interpretation of chapters 21-22, which De Alcazar regards as a description of the triumph of the Roman Catholic church.

There may or may not have been some point to the apocalyptic perspective on the crisis that provoked the Reformation and subsequent conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism, but this is not an endorsement of the Historicist argument that New Testament prophecy was finding its fulfilment in these events.<sup>4</sup>

The polemical origins, continuing controversialism, and sectarian rhetoric of Preterism make it a difficult movement to evaluate - and I have to admit, my instinct is still to hold it somewhat at arm's length. I don't think it helps to address the issue from such a strongly demarcated and narrowly *eschatological* position. But Preterists are finding increasingly that they have common ground, on the one hand, with historical readings of scripture that take seriously the contingency of the biblical narrative, and on the other, with emerging theologies that want to shift the eschatological focus towards the renewal of creation. This can be illustrated with a couple of quotations from an introductory [article on the International Preterist Association website](#):

Bible prophecy can be understood, but Futurist views have fallen far short for many reasons: their extreme physical/literalizing approach, their seeming inability to distinguish between figurative and literal language, and their failure to properly take into account the historical-grammatical-cultural context of the prophecies (specifically what they meant to their original audience)....

This view offers a much more positive and realistic worldview. It is conservative, consistent, optimistic, responsible and accountable. And it robs us of no motivation for either living the Christian life, or evangelizing the world. In fact, it's the only view which gives us a consistent reason for being constructively involved in making the world a better place for the long-term, unlike the short-term escapist and withdrawal mindset of most futurists.

### **Narrative-realism**

The narrative-realist approach has arisen not primarily for the purpose of addressing eschatological questions. It is an attempt to read the Bible with a historical imagination - asking in the process whether that does not actually get us closer to the heart of its 'revelatory' character. With respect to reading the New Testament there are, I think, two basic assumptions.

The first is that we should expect the texts to address the circumstances and concerns of the original reading community unless there is a clear indication to the contrary. One crucial implication here is that that when future events are described, it is likely that a *foreseeable* state of affairs is in view rather than an inconceivable future beyond the historical purview of the first century church.

The second is that we should assume that the authors of the New Testament, including Jesus, in making extensive use of the Old Testament, grasped the historical realism of the prophetic texts that they invoked. Jesus understood, for example, that when Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke about judgment on, and the restoration of, Israel, this was a realistic prophetic reference to the Babylonian invasion and the return from exile. So in retelling these stories for first century Israel, he was thinking just as realistically about the impending war against Rome, which he regarded as a final judgment on a rebellious people, and the transformation of the people of God through this experience.

An example may be helpful. Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a warning about false prophets and a little story about two men, one who builds his house on the sand, the other on a rock, and when the flood and storm come, the house on the sand is washed away. In Ezekiel 13 we have a similar warning against prophets who have 'uttered falsehood and seen lying visions' and a parable about a wall that was built by the people and whitewashed by the false prophets, and which was destroyed in a storm and a flood. A narrative-realist reading of Jesus' teaching would conclude from this that he has reworked Ezekiel's argument for his own historical context: Israel has built its house (the house of Israel, the temple?) on the teachings of false prophets and cannot therefore expect it to stand when the flood and storm of God's judgment come upon it.

Notice that this becomes not a story of *personal* salvation but a metaphor for the condition of the nation.

The point here is not simply that apocalyptic sayings in the Gospels should be interpreted with reference to the Jewish War. It is that the whole story should be situated within this expectation and the historical circumstances that give rise to it. The Sermon on the Mount is not generalized religious teaching. It fundamentally presupposes a narrative of national destruction and renewal; it is the means by which Jesus begins to define an alternative community of Israel, blessed because it is prepared to follow a painful path of righteousness in search of the reign of God (c.f. [Matt. 5:2-12](#)).

### Finding relevance in narrative-realism

Naturally, this sort of approach leaves us wondering whether the New Testament has any relevance at all for us today.

It should be admitted, in the first place, that the narrative-realist hermeneutic is not suddenly going to supplant the various a-historical and even anti-historical modes of reading that underpin the church's practical reliance on scripture as the living Word of God. But I think we will be greatly helped in the task of reconstructing our belief system after the collapse of Christendom if we give some measure of priority to the task of reading imaginatively from *within* the narrative. This exercise should at least run alongside the other approaches to scripture.

But I would suggest also that there are ways of making the text relevant for worship, ministry and mission that are fundamentally compatible with the narrative-realist approach.

1. **Selective direct relevance.** When Jesus told his followers that they must love their enemies, he meant that should not take part in the coming uprisings against Roman power by which many in Israel would seek to redress the evils of occupation and bring in the reign of God. Only the path of loving self-giving - only the way of the cross - would lead to the deliverance of the people of God. That is the narrative-realist interpretation: Jesus provides realistic and relevant teaching for the particular narrative context. But we can hardly object to the restatement of that requirement for the post-eschatological church, whenever it becomes relevant.

2. **Living the sequel.** It is not hermeneutics or any tradition of interpretation that establishes the relevance of the New Testament texts but the continuing existence of the community. It is *our* story because we are the same people, we are heirs of the promise to Abraham, we are the product of the events that happened in the period from the first appearance of John the Baptist to the eventual collapse of pagan Rome. We ensure that we remain on that trajectory only by checking and re-checking the coordinates established in the New Testament.

3. **The transformative power of remembrance.** The Jews were repeatedly reminded that God had brought them from slavery in Egypt and that this should have made a difference to their behaviour: 'O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery...' ([Mic. 6:3](#)). There is no reason why the biblically informed remembrance of what happened should not be similarly transformative for the

post-biblical community. Just as Israel was instructed to remember its exodus ('You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this': [Deut. 24:17-18](#)), so Jesus' disciples were instructed to remember the significance of his death (eg. [Lk. 22:19](#)).

**4. The prophetic tradition.** At the heart of the narrative-realist hermeneutic is the recognition that prophetic motifs and stories from the Old Testament are retold in the first century in order to make sense of analogous circumstances. Although I would argue that the New Testament's view of the future is for the most part circumscribed by the horizons of judgment on Jerusalem and judgment on pagan Rome, the option is open to us to retell biblical stories for new but analogous situations in our own time. Just as the New Testament borrowed from Daniel the story of a Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven to speak of the foreseen vindication both of Jesus and of his disciples against their enemies, so we may use the motif again to give hope to the persecuted church under much later conditions. The important point to keep in mind, however, is that this is not an exercise in exegesis; it is a genuinely prophetic *revitalization* of texts that have already served their historical purpose.

**5. Eschatological transposition.** Finally, I argued in *Re: Mission* that two different stories intersect in the New Testament, each having its own eschatology. There is a story about the renewal of creation, which goes right back to the calling of Abraham and has its eschatological fulfilment in the final renewal of creation described in Revelation 21-22. But when this overarching story comes into crisis, it is recovered by means of another redemptive story about faithful suffering whose end comes more immediately in the vindication of Jesus and of those who suffered with him and in the defeat of their enemies. I suggested that the missional response of the church now is not fundamentally to the crisis of the early centuries but to the crisis of creation and that this calls for a fully *creational* response. But it becomes possible to transpose aspects of one story to the other. If for Jesus the healing of the sick was a sign that God was forgiving Israel and bringing wholeness to a people under judgment, so now, analogously, healing *in the name of Jesus* is a sign that God will eventually make all things new - that is, all creation, not merely Israel (cf. [Rev. 21:5](#)).

1. I owe this simple illustration to a short article on patristic exegesis by Michael Delahoyde.
2. See, for example, R. Cooke, 'The Unmitigated Twaddle of Jesuit-Romanist Preterism'.
3. See *The Coming of the Son of Man*, 182-223.
4. For a somewhat rabid defence of Historicism see M. Scheifler, 'The Catholic Origins of Futurism and Preterism'.